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A comparative analysis of teaching vocabulary in context and by definition

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Abstract

The study aims to prove a hypothesis related to the different ways of teaching vocabulary and their effectiveness. This study has been applied at two classes of the Department of Foreign Languages of TOBB University of Economics and Technology. These classes have been instructed on words in two different techniques; one of which is teaching vocabulary in discourse and context whereas the other is teaching words by providing only the word definitions. A vocabulary test composed of four parts has been constructed and applied before and after the instruction. The test has been applied in two steps as a pretest to show the selected words are unknown by the students and as a posttest to evaluate the effectiveness of both techniques. According to Levene's test in Independent Samples Test for the post-test, there is not a statistically significant difference in post-test scores of the two groups. As a result, presenting the target vocabulary items in context and by definitions does not make a remarkable difference in terms of overall performance.

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1. Introduction

In relation to vocabulary teaching, researchers suggest that teaching new vocabulary should begin by presenting the new items in context and then the learners should be given the opportunity of dealing with words out of context (Palmberg, 1988). It is important to provide learners with strategies for inferring the meaning of unknown vocabulary from the context in which it occurs instead of getting them to memorize long lists of words or look up unknown words in a dictionary which would make the reading process slow and tedious and which would probably not contribute to the actual learning of vocabulary. Honeyfield (1977) makes many suggestions for improving

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learners' skills in inferring meaning from context such as cloze or gap exercise in which words are deleted from a text, words-in-context exercises and context enrichment exercises.

Although choosing to teach vocabulary in context has plenty of reasons, the real value of context lies in its authenticity, the benefits of which are of three different sorts. As it is suggested by Monsell (1985), first of all, assessing the meaning of a word in context obliges students to develop strategies like anticipating and inferring, which become highly beneficial as learning progresses because they instill an attitude of self-reliance that is the distinctive feature of proficiency. Secondly, systematically meeting new vocabulary items in context emphasizes the fact that the words are actually used in discourse for purposes of communication. Lastly, all the factors mentioned above can be said to contribute to a learner's L2 autonomy and to facilitate the transfer of knowledge that accompanies it. Moreover, they underline the fact that the mental presentation of a word's meaning improves together with successive encounters in different contexts. Thus, it may be subjected to modification because new and finer semantic distinctions are added.

Being one of the most important themes, the fact that language reflects the contexts in which it is used and the purposes to which it is put is of great value. As Nunan (1995) puts it, since language is best encountered and learned in context, this has particular implications for practice. Firstly, this would argue against the idea of learning of lists of decontextualized vocabulary items. In addition, the emphasis in class would be on encouraging students to develop strategies such as inferring the meaning of new vocabulary items from the context in which they appear and teaching them to make use of both verbal and non-verbal cues to determine meaning.

Mainly, there are five suggestions by Kruse (1979) for teaching written vocabulary in context.

Word elements such as prefixes, suffixes and roots: Recognizing component parts of words, words families is of great value because it is one of the most significant vocabulary skills the students may need. It also decreases the number of new words they will encounter and increases their control of the English lexicon.

Pictures, diagrams, charts: Students may relate the illustration with the item that is difficult to understand.

Clues of definition: Students must be taught to notice many types of useful definition clues like parenthesis or footnotes, synonyms and antonyms.

Inference clues from discourse: Students can benefit from example clues, summary clues and experience clues to infer the meaning from the context.

General aids: This includes the function of the word such as noun, adjective, etc.

Being another suggested way, teaching vocabulary by definition simply requires providing students with the explanation provided by monolingual dictionaries.

2. Purpose

This study has been carried out upon the purpose of proving the proposed hypothesis. It has been studied whether knowing only the definition of a word is enough to know a word or it also requires the semantic knowledge of the word when encountered in speech or print. In addition, contributing to our learners' vocabulary has been a basis while deciding on this study.

Some implications of the purpose can be explained as follows:

-A language learner continues to expand his vocabulary in all levels of proficiency contrary to a native speaker who makes up his vocabulary mainly in childhood.

-For many words, we also need to know the sort of words most likely to be associated with the word.

-Knowing a word implies knowing the limitations imposed on the use of the word according to the function and situations.

-Knowing a word includes knowing the semantic function of that word. (Richards, 1976)

Upon such implications, the following hypothesis has been drawn:

"Teaching vocabulary in context indicating the use and function of the word is comparatively more effective than teaching vocabulary by providing only the dictionary definitions of words."

3. Participants

This study has been conducted at the two different classes of the Department of Foreign Languages of TOBB University of Economics and Technology. In order to prove the hypothesis, the students of the two classes have been selected. The textbook (Barton and Sardinas, 2004) covered for the reading and writing courses of the Preparatory Unit has been the base for the selection of the vocabulary. 40 words have been selected among the units which had not been covered in class yet. Therefore, it was assumed that the students do not know those words.

The two different classes have been instructed on the words in two different techniques; one of which is teaching vocabulary in discourse and context (Group 2) whereas the other is teaching the words by providing only the word definitions (Group 1). The test has been applied in two steps as a pretest to evaluate how unknown those words are and as a posttest to evaluate the effectiveness of both techniques.

The subjects who are prone to the instruction and the test of vocabulary are Preparatory Unit students of the TOBB University of Economics and Technology. Both groups are A Level classes which started the semester as beginner level students. This case is on purpose so that the students are at the same proficiency level. Both classes have been working on the same program since the beginning of the semester. Thus, the level of instruction and the knowingness' of the words are not different in either class.

4. Data Collection

Data collection procedure is divided into two periods of research. The first part consists of survey and pretest while the students are required to take posttest in the second part of the study.

By giving the students the survey, it is aimed to see how many of the target vocabulary items they know, are able to use, don't know or cannot use. In the survey, the list of forty target vocabulary items is presented and the students are expected to put (X) under the suitable title. The titles are determined regarding the levels of a lexical knowledge expected from students. So, the categories are the following:

- I know the meaning, synonyms and derivations of the word.
- I know only the meaning of the word.
- I don't know the meaning of the word but I can understand it in the context.
- I identify the word but I don't know the meaning.
- I don't know the word.

The original survey is prepared in Turkish because of the reason that target language may interfere with some students with low-level abilities.

By giving the students pretest, it is aimed to reinforce the fact that the students don't know the target vocabulary items. The pretest which is a complete vocabulary test has four components. The first part includes ten items which require the students to match the given words and the definitions. Being involved in ten multiple choice items in the second part, the students are required to choose the correct word to complete the given sentences. In the third part, the students deal with a fixed-ratio cloze test in which every tenth word is deleted and it requires them to find the exact word. The forth part of the test includes a writing section in order to make the students produce the target words. While preparing the test, it is aimed to provide both context and definition in order not to favor any group because the methods are teaching vocabulary in context and by definition in two groups of subjects.

The second part of the data collection procedure is composed of posttest. The same test has been given to the students again after the instruction is completed in order to compare two sets of results. The pre-test and post-test results are evaluated out of 40 each part of which is assessed out of 10.

5. Results and Discussion

Survey results revealed that 67% of the students didn't know the words. In addition, 12% of them expressed that they identified the word but didn't know the meaning while 9% said that they didn't know the meaning but they could understand it in context. However, 8% of them stated that they knew the meaning whereas only 4% of the students thought that they knew the meaning, synonyms, and derivations of the word.

The pre-test scores in Group 1 (M=5) and Group 2 (M=1,73) out of 40 also showed that the students didn't know the words before instruction.

As for post-test scores, an independent-samples t-test has been conducted to compare vocabulary by definition and in context scores for Group 1 and 2. The first section of the Independent Samples Test output box gives the results of Levene's Test for equality of variances. Frequency is ,340 and Sig. value is ,564. In t-test for equality of means section Sig. (2-tailed) is ,079 for equality of variances. The results are for Group 1 (\bar{M} =19.00, \underline{SD} =5.01) and Group 2 (\bar{M} =22.53, \underline{SD} =5.57) indicated that there was not a statistically significant difference in post-test scores for Groups 1 and 2.

Similarly, an independent-samples t-test has been conducted to compare definition matching part scores for Group 1 and 2. The first section of the Independent Samples Test output box gives the results of Levene's Test for equality of variances. Frequency is 4,750 and Sig. value is ,038. In t-test for equality of means section Sig. (2-tailed) is ,000 for equal variances not assumed. The results are for Group 1 (\bar{M} =9.06, \underline{SD} =1.38) and Group 2 (\bar{M} =5.46, \underline{SD} =2.61) showed that there is a significant difference between the mean scores of definition matching part for each of the two groups. This difference may lead to the inference that since Group 1 is instructed the target words by definitions, they perform on this part better than the subjects of Group 2 whom the words have been taught in context.

Additionally, an independent-samples t-test has been conducted to compare multiple choice part scores for Group 1 and 2. The first section of the Independent Samples Test output box gives the results of Levene's Test for equality of variances. Frequency is 5,091 and Sig. value is ,032. In t-test for equality of means section Sig. (2-tailed) is ,115 for equal variances assumed. The results for Group 1 (\bar{M} =8.53, \underline{SD} =1.59) and Group 2 (\bar{M} =7.73, \underline{SD} =1.03) revealed that there is not a statistically significant difference in the mean scores for Groups 1 and 2. The results can be relied on the fact that the subjects have the chance to guess the correct alternative in the multiple choice part. In addition, multiple choice part requires recognition rather than production. Therefore, subjects of both groups performed almost equally in this section.

An independent-samples t-test has been conducted to compare cloze test part scores for Group 1 and 2. The first section of the Independent Samples Test output box gives the results of Levene's Test for equality of variances. Frequency is 7,681 and Sig. value is ,010. In t-test for equality of means section Sig. (2-tailed) is ,000 for equal variances assumed. The results for Group 1 (\bar{M} =,66, \underline{SD} =,81) and Group 2 (\bar{M} =4.73, \underline{SD} =2.25) indicated that there is a statistically significant difference in the mean scores for Groups 1 and 2. This difference results from the high performance of the subjects in Group 2 in this part. They did well in this section because it matches with the way of instruction they are exposed to. In Group 2, the words have been taught in context. That's why the subjects of this group take the advantage of encountering the target words in suitable context provided in cloze test.

Finally, an independent-samples t-test has been conducted to compare writing part scores for Group 1 and 2. The first section of the Independent Samples Test output box gives the results of Levene's Test for equality of variances. Frequency is 1,167 and Sig. value is ,289. In t-test for equality of means section Sig. (2-tailed) is ,017 for equal variances not assumed. The results for Group 1 (\bar{M} =2.13, \underline{SD} =2.32) and Group 2 (\bar{M} =4.60, \underline{SD} =2.94) revealed that there is a significant difference in the mean scores on dependable variable for each of the two groups. This difference between the mean scores of writing part is due to the better performance of Group 2 subjects. It can be concluded that the subjects of Group 2 who are exposed to appropriate context for target words during the instruction are more inclined to be involved in production whereas the subjects of Group 1 do not have the ability to produce the vocabulary items.

6. Conclusion

This study has been carried out upon the hypothesis that teaching vocabulary in context indicating the use and function of the word is comparatively more effective than teaching vocabulary by providing only the dictionary definitions of words. However, the results indicate that generally there is no great difference between the performances of the subjects of two groups who were instructed in different ways. Presenting the target vocabulary items in context and by definitions does not make a remarkable difference in terms of overall performance. On the other hand, the subjects are inclined to perform better on test tasks which are consistent to the way they have been instructed. They are highly successful in the sections parallel to the way they have been taught.

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